

INTRODUCTION

With numerous publications about the American Avant-Garde Cinema the history of this trend of American filmmaking seems to have been written. Important directors have been identified, films have been described exhaustively and categorized into groups, and evolutionary interpretative schemata have been proposed. In this paper I do not intend to challenge the established literature on the American Avant-Garde Film. On the contrary, I must acknowledge that this literature has motivated and shaped my recent historical and theoretical interest in the Avant-Garde Cinema. However, like any other standard history the history of the American Avant-Garde could not but be open to questions. One, for example, could start checking the historiography of the American Avant-Garde, by asking questions concerning experimental directors: Who has been discussed in the standard Avant-Garde History, how, and why? Who has not been included and why? Answers to these questions may help us to revise the significant work that has been done in the past and, consequently, to broaden our knowledge about the American Avant-Garde History itself.¹

In my paper I will examine the work of Sara Kathryn Arledge, a pioneer of the American experimental film, who has been ignored in the standard historical writings. First, I will provide some biographical information about the artist, since this information is either unknown or scattered in various hard-to-locate publications. In the second part of my paper I will focus on Arledge's first film, Introspection, made between 1941-1946 and released in 1947. I will

¹The need for revision has been suggested by many feminist critics whom I will discuss throughout my paper as well as by James Peterson in his *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order. Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1994, pp. 11-12.

analyze the film stylistically and relate it to Arledge's artistic background and to an article by her written in 1947. Given the interesting character of Introspection, I will address the issue of its omission in the established Avant-Garde literature and suggest some explanations for this. In the third part of my paper I will discuss Arledge's second film, What is a Man?, finished in 1958 but not shown until 1976. I will argue that the film's style and content as well as the fact that it remained unreleased for twenty years can be of particular interest for feminist criticism.

Most of the information concerning Sara Kathryn Arledge come from local publications and unpublished material provided to me by Terry Cannon. This paper would not have been accomplished without his generous help.

I. SARA KATHRYN ARLEDGE

Sara Kathryn Arledge was born in Mojave, California, in 1911. Between 1930-1936 she studied Art at the University of California, Los Angeles, and during the forties she occasionally taught Art in Universities and Colleges at Oklahoma, Oakland, and San Francisco². Painting was Arledge's primary occupation throughout her life, but she also devoted herself to writing and cinema.

Arledge's first serious consideration of moving images seem to go as far back as the late twenties. More specifically, in 1927 a performance of Thomas Wilfred's light organ at the Pasadena Playhouse revealed to her the possibilities of creating an abstract picture with changing shapes and three dimensional color forms.³ In an article on the Experimental Film written by her in 1947,

² *Vita--Sara Kathryn Arledge*, p. 1.

³ *Unpublished interview* by Tony Reveaux (Pasadena, CA 8/11/77), pp. 5-6.

Arledge described attempts to create an experimental cinema during the twenties and emphasized Wilfred's impact on young filmmakers. "In America", she wrote, "Wilfred was perfecting his invention, the Clavalux or light organ. The Clavalux was a machine that produced and projected fluid, third-dimensional forms of colored light directly on a screen, where they move, change in shape, color, and intensity, and faded into darkness. The concert tours that Wilfred made in the middle twenties aroused general enthusiasm over his mobile color compositions, and the idea of a visual time art".⁴

The next step of Arledge's involvement with the cinematographic art was the purchase of a Bell & Howell camera in 1936. Along with her first husband, Clyde Smith, she took her camera to White River, Arizona, and filmed the Fourth of July dance celebration of the Apache Indians.⁵ Later she threw this footage away. "I was not interested in documentary", she explained.⁶

Actually, throughout the thirties and early forties Arledge noted down ideas which contradicted the same notion of documentary film. Her plans concerned three-dimensional abstract projects and complex dance films with painted bodies and live animals.⁷ These early attempts did not materialize, except for the case of Introspection which I will discuss soon. These unrealized attempts, however, are indicative of the general artistic climate that shaped the World War II era. Arledge's own account of that era summarizes the basic characteristics of the early experimental filmmaking:

see, also, Catrina Neiman, *Women Pioneers of the American Experimental Film: Bute, Arledge, Menken, Scheemann*, unpublished translation in English of a German article, p. 7; and Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge: Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *New Magazine*, May, 1977, pp. 32-33.

⁴Sara Kathryn Arledge, "The Experimental Film: A new Art in Transition", *Arizona Quarterly*, Summer 1947, p. 103.

⁵Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge: Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *ibid.*, p.33.

⁶*Unpublished interview* by Tony Reveaux, *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷*Vita*, *ibid.*, p. 2.

"If you understands the conditions under which we worked in the 1930's and 1940's--there were no film classes in any University whatsoever, there was no film field. Some individuals apart from each other went to work with film as some kind of an art medium. Some of us from painting and some from poetry, dance, and so-on. I got interested in adding time to painting."⁸

Keeping in mind the conditions of the 1930s and 1940s one may start feeling the significance of Arledge's early attempts. She was not just an artist who experimented with the film medium during the years of Hollywood's dominance. She was also a *female* artist. Reading Jacobs's article "Avant-Garde Production in America"--probably the most exhaustive source in terms of accumulation of filmmakers' names⁹--one realizes that Arledge was one of the four--in total--pioneer female filmmakers. (The other three were Bute, Menken, and Deren). Moreover, in 1946 Arledge moved temporarily to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she became the first woman to join a local experimental film organization which included a number of now famous filmmakers--Curtis Harrington, Sidney Peterson, James Boughton, and Kenneth Anger.¹⁰ In terms of her pioneering activities related to experimental cinema I should also mention the fact that while teaching Art at the University of Arizona at Tucson (1945/6) she rented Maya Deren's films and put on a show "which the students were quite interested in".¹¹

Arledge's sex should not be ignored in an examination of her films. Actually, her films, as I will try to suggest, evoke a distinct feminine sensibility. Moreover, the artist's sex may not be irrelevant to the fact that her films remain unknown.

⁸Unpublished interview, *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁹Lewis Jacobs, "Avant-Garde Production in America", in *Experiment in Film*, ed. by Roger Manvell, The Grey Walls Press LTD, 1949, pp. 113-152.

¹⁰Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge: Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹Unpublished Interview by Tony Reveaux, *ibid.*, p. 1.

INTROSPECTION

Introspection was Arledge's first film. It is a 6 minute long abstract dance film. The first half of it was made in 1941. As soon as Arledge had started Introspection in Pasadena, California, she learned that John and James Whitney, who lived nearby, worked on similar abstract film projects.¹² According to Arledge, some of the technical issues concerning the use of color in Introspection were suggested by the Whitney brothers.¹³ The shooting of the film started at CalTech's Football field and continued in a studio in Hollywood provided to her by Lester Horton, who was a dance teacher in Hollywood.¹⁴ Introspection, however, was not completed until 1946. As Terry Cannon explains, "short teaching assignments...coupled with the enlistment of Arledge's two cameramen in the US Army were the major delays."¹⁵ After its completion, Introspection was premiered along with Lev Kuleshov's By the Law in the "Art in Cinema" program of May 2, 1947, at the San Francisco Museum of Art.¹⁶

Although 6 minutes long, Introspection could be divided into twelve brief 'segments' separated by fade outs and ins. In each segment whole human

¹²For John and James Whitney's work see P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, Oxford University Press, 1979, second edition, pp. 239-241.

¹³*Unpublished Interview*, *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴*Unpublished Interview*, *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge: Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶Terry Cannon, "Lions Don't Eat Lovers", *Follies*, vol. II, October 1976, p.6.

The 'Art in Cinema' series was initiated in San Francisco in 1947 thanks to Frank Stauffacher and Richard Foster who according to Lewis Jacobs "were actually the first in this country to assemble, document, and exhibit a series of strictly avant-garde showings on a large scale" (*Experiment in Film*, *ibid.*, p. 133).

figures or parts of human bodies are seen performing smooth dance movements accompanied by Schubert's second movement of the "Death of the Maiden" quartet. The uninterrupted flow of the music along with the harmonic movements of the dancers and the use of such cinematic techniques as slow motion and multiple exposures endow Introspection with a sense of continuity. Four 'visual themes' are repeated with variations in Introspection. Combined, these themes reveal certain artistic experiments associated, to a large extent, with European artistic tendencies.

Introspection's first visual theme, repeated twice, is the reddish image of a man's head moving slowly from the left to the right of the screen against a dark background. What is interesting is the fact that the image of the head is actually multiplied, through the use of superimposition, in such a way that the viewer simultaneously watches two and sometimes three stages of the very same movement. This first visual theme clearly puts forward the basic concept of the cubist art, namely the depiction of reality from multiple perspectives seen at the very same time. Since cinema, however, is an art developed in time, by letting the heads move Arledge manages to incorporate into her shots both the notion of multiple points of view and the idea of a simultaneous depiction of successive temporal stages. Introspection's first shot, therefore, exemplifies Arledge's aforementioned statement regarding her interest in the film medium: "I got interested in adding time to painting".

The cubist notion of multiple perspectives resurfaces in the second visual theme of the film, namely in the image of a reclining man who appears in both normal and inverted position against a black background. This and a couple of similar shots introduce one more aspect of experimentation. Filmed by a very wide angle lens and from above, the human figure seems significantly distorted: his feet, being close to the camera, look disproportionately big

compared to the rest of the body. This distortion of real proportions is further accentuated by the movements of the figure's feet: the closer the feet to the camera, the more intense the distortion. Arledge's technique, following similar modernist experimentation, opens up fresh ways of perceiving reality. By distorting the fixed character of appearances the artist can endow reality with expressiveness.

The image of a distorted reclining figure against an unidentifiable background recalls strongly the works of the European modernist sculptors who were known as Object Abstractionists.¹⁷ A recurrent characteristic of the work of Object Abstractionism was the omission of various parts of the human body in the figures' depiction. In Introspection this motif is repeated in the film's longest part and leads to striking artistic results. "Disembodied parts of dancers", Lewis Jacobs said "are seen moving freely in black space".¹⁸ Hands, arms, shoulders, and legs in soft colors execute loose dance movements. Actually, the parts of the bodies seem like abstract color forms swimming or flying into the darkness. It is obvious that such an imagery transcends the limits imposed to the Object Abstractionists by their motionless art.

The last visual theme of Introspection is the image of human hands turning incessantly around themselves. The movements are distorted and given depth by simulated anamorphic photography: a Chrysler hubcap was used for a convex reflecting surface.¹⁹ In this case, Arledge's experimentation with the illusion of three-dimensional images, apparent throughout the film, reaches its climax.

¹⁷For the Object Abstractionists see Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, pp. 21-25. Introspection's reclining figures show a particular resemblance to Henry Moore's reclining figures of the mid- and late thirties.

¹⁸*Experiment in Film*, *ibid.*, 142.

¹⁹Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge. Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *ibid.*, p. 33 and Catrina Neiman, *Women Pioneers*, *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

A stylistic analysis of Introspection reveals that Arledge was preoccupied with certain questions raised by modern artists in the first decades of the twentieth century. In Introspection the traditional depiction of a human figure is totally rejected. The dancers' bodies are distorted, fragmented, and seen from many points of view. By mentioning some tendencies of modern art in relation to Arledge's first film my purpose is not to reveal any direct influences. Actually the idea of influences does not illustrate anything by itself. If I associated Introspection with those tendencies, I did this because this association may constitute one of the reasons that the filmmaker's work remained unknown. Before proceeding to this issue in detail, I should discuss an early critical response to the film by Lewis Jacobs, and Arledge's own philosophy about the cinematographic art.

In the article "Avant-Garde production in America" written around 1948 Lewis Jacobs provides an extensive overview of the film experiments that took place in the U. S. from the early twenties until the late forties. In the post World War II Jacobs distinguishes three trends of Avant-Garde filmmaking. In the first trend, he includes films by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, and Sitney Peterson-James Broughton, which reveal "agony and experience" and constitute personal statements exclusively concerned with the doings and feelings of the filmmakers themselves.²⁰ These films, Jacobs observes, have little or no influence from the European Avant-Garde. Another trend is made up of some films which oscillate between realism and formalism (Paul Bumfold, Lewis Jacobs).²¹ The third group (actually, the second one in Jacobs' narrative) is carrying on the non-objective school of abstract film design. This group's films concern abstract images, color, and rhythm, and

²⁰*Experiment in Film*, *ibid.*, pp. 138-139

²¹*ibid.*, pp. 143-8.

have their roots in the European film experiments of the early twenties. Here, Jacobs discusses films by Oscar Fishinger, John and James Whitney, and Douglas Crockwell as well as Arledge's Introspection.²²

Jacobs's discussion of Introspection is very interesting because not only does he appraise the film but also considers it as a work leading to new paths of experimental filmmaking and spectatorial experience as well:

"Markedly different in approach, technique, and style from the pictures of the other non-objectivists is the film by Sara Arledge called Introspection...The result is a kind of abstraction and a completely new visual experience, especially heightened with two or three coloured forms are juxtaposed in multiple exposure. The use of colour is striking and unlike colour in any other experiment thus far. Although episodic and incomplete, Introspection is original in style. Its departure in technique suggests new directions in unconventional and abstract cinema".²³

Jacobs's criticism of Introspection's incompleteness should be read in relation to what this historian knew about Arledge's original plan. That plan was "a dance film based on the theme of the unfolding of a dance pattern in the conscious mind of the dancer".²⁴ One might argue that Arledge's use of the head of the dancer in the beginning and the middle of the film attempts to present the abstract dance forms as derivative from the dancer's 'conscious mind'. A viewer however could hardly grasp the theme of "unfolding of a dance pattern". Jacobs rightly observes that the work seems as a series of loosely connected experiments.²⁵ In addition Introspection does not seem to fulfill Arledge's artistic plans from one more point of view. In an article written by her in 1947 Arledge provided an overview of the Avant-Garde Cinema from the beginning of the century and distinguished two schools: the abstract and the

²²ibid., pp. 139-144.

²³ibid., pp. 142-3.

²⁴ibid., p. 142.

²⁵ibid., p. 142.

surrealist/fantastic one. Closing her historical account Arledge turned to an evaluation of these two trends and held that both put limits on the range of filmic experience: "The abstract school reduces the world to its basic visual elements of space, shape, and color and the surrealist school reduces man to his subjective self, and that, to its basic element, the source of man's dynamic impulses, the subconscious".²⁶ Instead, Arledge proposes a *synthesis* of these and other complex facets of human experience:

"Man's other activities, such as feeling, imagining, thinking, talking, and acting, as well as the subconscious urges and dreams, can be used as subject matter. The changing of developing nature of these activities and the flux of the relationships between them is highly suitable material. Conflicts between men and between man and nature offer possibilities for treatment....The portrayal of significant features of growth and change in nature, as well as in man, could present a valuable aesthetic experience. These and other sources of subject matter offer a wider scope for exploration and expression by the experimental film in this period of its transition into a mature art".²⁷

As we shall see, some of the premises of the 1947 article were tried out in Arledge's second film of the late 1950's. However, in the article's contemporary film, Introspection, notions such as 'conflicts' and 'growth and change in nature and in man' are not evident. Nevertheless, this article and Introspection meet at one point. They both propose a *new* experience. And although Introspection's experience is generated from abstract shapes and arbitrary colors, the fact that these abstract shapes derive from human bodies and movements should not be underestimated. Introspection is not a synthesis of the abstract and the surrealist schools or a depiction of conflicts but *it does combine the abstract and the human* as a means of investigating the possibilities of the film art as well as conveying expressiveness.

²⁶Sara Kathryn Arledge, "The Experimental Film: A New Art in Transition", *ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁷*ibid.*, p. 112.

Given the above original aspect of Introspection, Jacobs's positive account, and the film's availability for distribution, the issue of the film's omission in the established literature becomes intriguing. Actually this issue leads us back to the questions raised in my introduction: who has not been included in the Avant-Garde History and why?

These questions have been raised overtly by a number of feminist critics who looked at the established Avant-Garde Historiography and pinpointed its weaknesses. This kind of criticism was initiated in the 1970's. Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom's article in two pieces "The Avant-Garde: History and Theories" constitutes the most representative case of such a critique.²⁸ Penley's piece investigates and questions the phenomenological formalism of Avant-Garde history, an issue interesting in itself. For our purposes, however, Bergstrom's piece has greater significance. More specifically, Bergstrom leads the reader's attention to the fact that the bulk of the Avant-Garde historiography discusses, analyses, and praises a number of films which have been already categorized as "masterpieces" by the very fact of them being held in the Anthology Film Archives.²⁹ In confronting this problem, Bergstrom says, the future analysts should take into consideration which discourses of historical writing, sexuality, theater, cinema, and mass media enter into play.³⁰ Bergstrom's suggestions constitute an appropriate starting point for addressing the problem of Introspection's omission from the standard History. In the following lines I will argue that this omission may well have to do with the dominant discourses of historical writing, art, and sexuality. In certain points I

²⁸This article, originally appeared in *Camera Obscura*, has been reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, vol. II, ed. by Bill Nichols, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, pp. 287-300. Penley's piece can also be found in Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion. Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 31-37.

²⁹*Movies and Methods*, vol. II, *ibid.*, pp. 295-7.

³⁰*ibid.*, p. 298.

will support my argument by further criticism on the established history provided by Lauren Rabinovitz.

The first discourse I will discuss is the one concerning art. As I mentioned earlier Jacobs identified three post-war schools of American Avant-Garde Filmmaking, the most important of which were the subjective and abstract ones. The first promoted itself as deviant from the European trends whereas the second school had obvious roots to those trends. I also attempted to demonstrate Introspection's link to certain European artistic models of experimentation and expressiveness. In this respect, however, Introspection disturbs the *dominant* American discourse of art during the 1940's, a discourse which in every manifestation (painting, sculpture) tried to disconnect the links between the New and the Old World or to attach itself primarily to Surrealism.³¹ I believe it is primarily within this context that we should read the approach to Avant-Garde in *the standard history*, *Visionary Film*, by P. Adams Sitney.

As Rabinovitz observes this and other books do not mention the pre-1940 film experiments.³² In *Visionary Film* the American Avant-Garde seems to start in 1943 with Maya Deren's Meshes in the Afternoon. This choice helps Sitney on various levels. First, by starting with Meshes and comparing the film with Un Chien Andalou, the historian is able to present the 'beginning' of the American Avant-Garde as linked to European Surrealism, yet different from it.³³ Second, by opening the book with Meshes Sitney lays down the

³¹See Wayne Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process: 1930-1970*, New York Graphic Society, Boston, Massachusetts, 1975, pp. 37-88.

³²Lauren Rabinovitz, "Wearing the Critic's Hat: History, Critical Discourses, and the American Avant-Garde Cinema", in *To Free the Cinema. Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. by David E. James, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p. 271.

³³For the American Avant-Garde Film within the dominant Surrealist Art discourse see Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance. Women, Power, and Politics in the New*

foundation upon which he builds his argument: the American Avant-Garde moves from the 'trance film' to the 'mythopoeitic' and the 'structural' one.

One can see now how a discussion of the abstract films of the 1940s along with Meshes would have endangered Sitney's purposes. Had this happened, the American Avant-Garde Cinema would not have been discussed within the dominant Surrealist discourse³⁴ and the evolutionary schema 'trance-mythopoeia-structure' could not have worked. A close comparison between Jacobs's article on the Avant-Garde and Sitney's book bring into light an interesting issue. Sitney discusses all of the filmmakers grouped by Jacobs into the subjective school. On the other hand, from the five representatives of the abstract school of the 1940s in Jacobs account, Sitney discusses only the Whitney brothers, putting them actually into a bracket while analyzing the work of Harry Smith.³⁵

Therefore, the abstract Avant-Garde of the mid-1940s, including Arledge's Introspection, seems suppressed in the standard history. This issue may have also to do with local tensions--East Coast vs. West Coast. Both in the 1940s when Meshes was produced and in the 1960s when Sitney's circle established itself, New York was the cultural center in the discourse of Art. Therefore, Sitney locates the 'beginning' of the American Avant-Garde Cinema in the New York artistic center. (The truth however is that Sitney does discuss West Coast's filmmakers if their work became influential, i.e. The Potted Psalm by Sitney Peterson and James Broughton).

York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, pp. 67-71.

³⁴Actually, Introspection's Abstract Objectionism is closer to the surrealist painting and sculpture than Deren's Meshes. In cinema discourse, however, surrealism had been associated with Un Chien Andalou's subjective narrative, not with surrealist painting and sculpture's semi-abstract imagery.

³⁵*Visionary Film*, *ibid.*, pp. 239-241.

In terms of Introspection one more specific local tension comes into play: San Francisco vs. Pasadena. This aspect has been discussed by Terry Cannon who attributed Arledge's films' unpopularity to the fact that "she had chosen to live and work most of her life in a modest Pasadena studio, isolated as it is from the major centers of artistic experimentation--San Francisco and New York".³⁶

Terry Cannon's description of Arledge's Pasadena studio as a "modest" one leads us to the last issue of this part of the paper--Arledge's sexuality. One might argue that the artist's relation to her art was permeated by a feminine sensibility. "There was a great deal of pressure on struggling independent film artists", Arledge said, "to move to New York which was *the* place. But I was not willing to give up the Western way of living, the beaches and the mountains which I so loved, for the New York scramble for fame and dough".³⁷ This passage implies that the Avant Garde Art discourse, probably like any other art discourse, involves a lot of struggle. A question however is raised: to what extent during the forties were women willing to participate in this struggle? The history of the Avant-Garde of that era indicates that only women of an extraordinary personality, such as Deren's, could come to terms with the struggle of the Art world.³⁸ Arledge's isolation in Pasadena could be interpreted as a decision shaped by specific social factors; women in general were not ready for the struggle within the male-dominated Avant-Garde circles.³⁹ This isolation has further significance: Arledge chooses to live close to nature, a

³⁶Terry Cannon, "Sara Kathryn Arledge: Pasadena's Film Pioneer", *ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁷*ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁸for this issue see Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, *ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

³⁹For the Avant-Garde world as a male-dominated one see Russell Campbell, "Eight Notes on the Underground", and Freyer Ellen, "Artistic Suicide in the Avant-Garde", *Velvet Light Trap*, 13, Fall 1974, pp. 45-6 and 47-49 respectively.

choice which could be identified as 'feminine' given the constant link between woman and nature in daily life's as well as art's discourse.

The issue of sexuality bring us back to the film--Introspection. Jacobs, as I said, found the film 'different' from the rest of the Avant-Garde films. At this point, one may pose some questions which could not lead to clear-cut answers but to some intriguing suggestions; Is it accidental that a 'different' film was made by a woman?⁴⁰ Isn't Introspection's conveyance of pure feelings and emotional appeal a feminine characteristic? Aren't there connections between the artist's sex and her inspiration by the roundness and tenderness of Object Abstractionist Art? The answer to each of these questions may be 'yes'. Whatever the case, Arledge's second film, What is a Man?, cannot be discussed independently of its artist's sex.

WHAT IS A MAN?

What is a Man? is a very different film from Introspection. Instead of abstract shapes and movements of dancing figures, What is a Man? consists of a series of extremely disjointed short narrative and abstract segments. In addition, some of the segments seem almost incomprehensible. For this film Catrina Neiman wrote: "The only relations between the scenes are relations interior to Arledge's psyche, and we must note that the film was finished nine months after her release from a hospital where she had been treated for mental instability, diagnosed as schizophrenia".⁴¹

Undoubtedly, What is Man? is a highly obscure film. However, Arledge's own notes as well as a close examination of the film reveal at least two pertinent themes: the conflict between nature and culture and the relationship between

⁴⁰The issue of women's art as different from and marginalized within the male-dominated discourse has been raised by a group of women critics commenting on a Art Exhibition in England in 1979: "Woman and the Formal Film", *Film as Film*, Art Council of Britain, 1979, p. 120.

⁴¹Catrina Neiman, *American Women*, *ibid.*, p. 11.

men and women. Moreover, these themes appear to be organized upon patterns of both individual development and mutual interaction. What is a Man? therefore seems to realize ideas that had been proposed by the artist in her 1947 article, regarding "conflicts between men and man and nature" and "features of growth and change in nature, as well as in man".

What is a Man? starts with two paintings, one of Adam and one of Eve, facing one another tenderly. In the soundtrack a woman's voice sings "Genesis". Thus the paintings and the song transfer the viewer to the beginning of humankind and comment on the close relationship between the sexes. Interestingly, as the painting suggests, this relationship took place in a natural environment. The next shot along with the soundtrack leads us to the present time; instead of the paintings we see a scientific diagram of a male and female body laced with Latin names for the organs. In this diagram the heads of the two figures face away from each other implying the alienation between the two sexes in our scientific society. This issue is worked out throughout the film. In shot four, for example, a flesh and blood naked pair look indifferently at one another while superimposed images of car lights as well as annoying horn honks are introduced.

Later a short narrative proceeds the issue of alienation. Shots 10-12 show a typical middle-class couple going presumably to their work by bus. Their meaningless conversation, which actually comes from *Macbeth*, could fit to a play of the theater of the absurd: - "Did you speak?" - "When?" - "Then". - "No". - "Yes". - "No". - "Yes". - "Oh!". - "Did you speak?" - "When?". - "Then". - "No".

The relationship between the two sexes is ridiculed in a short black-and-white segment which stars Beawolf and Somebody Elsie. The segment starts in a TV-like commercial parodic style and although interrupted sometimes by inserted absurd images it covers the second half of the film. By and large the

story starts with Beawolf and Somebody Elsie falling in love through the exchange of an automobile. Immediately however the hero suggests that she should see a medicine man, who in turn refers her to a 'sighcryatryst'. The couple ends up together again.

Other parts of the film depict symbolically the conflict between nature and culture. For example, in shot nine an image of a plant freezes and instead of blossoms, superimposed images of clocks, accompanied by a relevant sound, appear. Interestingly, what follows is a series of shots showing the middle-class couple (discussed above). It is obvious that Arledge tries to juxtapose the concepts of nature and modern society and to blame the latter for the two sexes' lack of communication.

What is interesting in What is Man? is the way in which the film conveys its message through its style. As Catrina Neiman observes this style combines dance film, unmediated observation of nature, and ironic psychodrama.⁴² The accumulation of so different film modes constitutes not only a first stage of departure from conventional cinema (already apparent, through other means, in Introspection) but an open critic to this kind of cinema as well. By its loose and almost collage narrative, What is a Man? harshly comments on traditional filmmaking's tightly woven structure. What is a Man? also includes a direct attack on commercial narrative art, by introducing Somebody Elsie's part in a TV commercial form. In its unfolding this story undermines classical filmmaking on many levels.

First, the name of the hero--Beawolf--seems to mock not only the man's role in a romantic relationship, but the traditional horror film as well. Second, in terms of acting What is a Man? disregards the dominant naturalist style and let the actors exaggerate their parts and even disrupt the fictional world by asking

⁴²Catrina Neiman, *American Women*, *ibid.*, p. 11.

"What do I do next?". Third, the non diegetic music resembles a typical soundtrack of a romantic scene of a Hollywood movie and thus the discrepancy between conventional music and unconventional visual style results in ironic effect. Interestingly, when the couple comes together at the end, they burst into a song promising 'love for ever'. Clearly this strategy satirizes the Hollywood musical film. Fourth, the conventional language of both commercial films and daily relationships is satirized. The dialogue consists of a series of puns, has rhyme, and is translated into a written form by subtitles. The film's unconventionality stems from all these techniques as well as from techniques that I described earlier: mix of styles and multiple exposures producing symbolic relations between images. To these I should add two more techniques: a) cubist-like images of a dancer filmed by three cameras and shown simultaneously from different points of view and b) the mocking of traditional filmic concepts such as 'credits' and 'end' of a movie. The 'credits' of What is a Man? is a shot of the players addressing the camera and greeting the audience. And instead of with "THE END" the film closes with the word "ETCETERA".

My analysis of What is a Man? aims at showing that the film not only does depart from traditional modes but also uses techniques which directly comment on and ridicule these modes.⁴³ Based on these observations one could take That is a Man? to be a case of radical, although aesthetically awkward, counter-cinema in which the codes of signification of the invisible Hollywood style are brought into light, ironically stressed out, and criticized. In other words, these codes--illusionist acting, notion of closure, unobstrutive narration-- become visible.

⁴³For Arledge's theoretical rejection of a Hollywood-type filmmaking see *New Magazine*, *ibid.*, p. 33.

The notion of a counter-cinema has been promoted during the last two decades by a number of critics, mostly feminist, who saw the filmic codes of signification as bearers of ideology. The dominant sexist ideology, these critics say, can be illuminated and subsequently rejected first and foremost through alternative, subversive modes of filmmaking.⁴⁴ This argument holds particularly true in the case of What is a Man? whose alternative style is interwoven with a rigorous representation of a woman's social repression. The central female character of the film, Somebody Elsie, passes through stages which have been decided by men. Her lover suggests that she should see a medicine doctor; the latter recommends that she should visit a 'sighcryatryst'. Somebody Elsie's position is paralleled through associative editing to that of a trapped mouse used for experiments.

The feminist discourse of the film goes even further. In Somebody Elsie's visits to the psychiatrist, her problem is implied to be her sexuality, something which causes the rage of her doctor. The film's second to last image however leaves the spectator in a state of regained harmony. A series of waves reach at a sea shore and create a semicircular shape. Filmed from above and from a long distance the shape created by the movements of the water strikingly resembles a woman's womb. Interestingly in the very last moments of the film the notions of 'woman' and 'nature' are totally combined. And the image conveys a feeling of harmony and contemplation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴See Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, ed. by Bill Nichols, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1976, p. 208. Also, Annette Kuhn, "Textual politics", *Women's Pictures. Feminism and Cinema*, Verso, London-New York, 1994 (second edition), pp. 151-71.

⁴⁵For this shot Arledge wrote: "The ocean shot that almost but not quite ends the film represents nature in its serene female aspect. In spite of human folly, all is right with the Cosmos", *Pasadena FilmForum*, Program Notes, October 2, 1978. Although Arledge's explanation could be regarded as an a posteriori 'reading' of the film, the point is that such an interpretation makes perfect sense.

The feminist discourse of What is a Man? should not be traced only to the film's style and narration. Two more feminist notions, namely "autobiography" and "silence", discussed by Bergstom and Rabinovitz respectively⁴⁶, apply to the film and link it to other Avant-Garde films made by women.

In tracing the autobiographical elements of What is a Man? one should inevitably look at the artist's personal life. As I mentioned earlier What is a Man? was completed nine months after Arledge's hospitalization for mental disorders. Undoubtedly, this experience is reflected in Somebody Elsie's story in the film. What is more interesting is the fact that this story condenses, ironically, certain events of Arledge's life: her frustrated and alienated relationship with her husband before and after her hospitalizations as well as the fact that her mental problems were associated to the issue of repressed sexual desire.⁴⁷ What is a Man? therefore constitutes an artistic effort to present and express problems of sexuality which are in the first place apparent in Arledge's real life. Keeping this in mind it is hard not to read the film as a woman's film, as a conscious effort to put forward questions about the male/female relationship and woman's repressed personality within the social structure.

As we saw, a second feminist notion, that of 'silence', applies to Arledge's first film, Introspection, since it has been ignored in the traditional Avant-Garde History. As feminist critics have observed, women's work on Avant-Garde film has been marginalized and considered 'minor' in the male-dominated artistic discourse.⁴⁸ In the case of What is a Man?, however, the

⁴⁶See *Movies and Methods*, vol. II, *ibid.*, p. 298; Lauren Rabinovitz, "Wearing the Critic's Hat", *ibid.*, p. 277.

⁴⁷See Arledge's own writings on her hospitalization: Sara K. Smith, "Madness in Memory", *Follies*, vol. 2, (December 1976, January 1977, February 1977, March 1977).

⁴⁸Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, *ibid.*, p. 24. See also, Russell Campell, "Eight notes on the Underground", *ibid.*, pp. 45-6 and "Woman and the Formal Film", *ibid.*, 118-20.

notion of silence operated in a more literal sense. The film was intentionally kept out of distribution by Arledge herself, who had been hospitalized after its completion four more times until 1970.⁴⁹ Instead of participating in the male-dominated art discourse Arledge expressed herself modestly between periods of hospitalization. Nevertheless, the standard historiography reveals that the time for women artists to promote rigorously their own 'voice' and problems through art had not yet come. Within this context the production of What is a Man? appears to be a case of proto-feminist work, while its omission from the distribution channels of the Avant-Garde reflects a socially shaped silence for female artists' expression of personal agonies.

My last remark is further confirmed by the fact of the film's release in 1976, in a "one-woman retrospective" at the Pasadena Filmforum. Given the new approach towards the film art, promoted by the feminist critics in the early 1970s⁵⁰, the year 1976 should be considered an appropriate time for an "one-woman retrospective" and a public screening of What is a Man? In the following years the rediscovery of women's art continued. It is within this context that we should read every retrospective presentation of Arledge's work (in 1978, and 1980)⁵¹ and the appearance of a few articles on her written by Terry Cannon and women filmmakers.⁵²

The purpose of this paper was not to christen Arledge's films as "masterpieces". Actually, this term is only relative. Standard histories however are often written following subjective criteria of what constitutes a "masterpiece" and what does not. A less dogmatic history would focus on works

⁴⁹Sara K. Smith, "Madness in Memory", *Follies*, vol. 2, (December 1976, part one), p. 9.

⁵⁰For a condensed narrative on the feminist critical work of the 1970s in both England and the USA see Annette Kuhn, *ibid.*, pp. 72-81.

⁵¹*Vita*, p. 1.

⁵²I have quoted these articles throughout my paper. To these I should add Barbara Hammer's enthusiastic article, "Sara Kathryn Arledge", *Cinemanews*, (Pasadena, CA), No. 1980-6/1981-1, pp. 3-4.

which were (and are) influential. Again, Arledge's films would be omitted since they did not appear to have any impact on Avant-Garde filmmaking. My purpose however was not only to show that an artist's relationship to his or her work is socially constructed, but furthermore to demonstrate that even the status of an artwork as influential or not, as one deserving analysis and examination or not, is defined by social discourses. I attempted to reveal that both the production and the critical perception of an artwork is shaped by social factors. Keeping this in mind, my reader should be aware of the fact that even this paper was not produced in a vacuum but in an academic environment some decades after Arledge's films, standard historiography's writings, and feminist criticism's discourse.⁵³

⁵³My appreciation for feminist criticism stem from its willingness to revise traditional assumptions and bring into light suppressed 'voices'. On the other hand, I oppose some feminist critics' ahistorical notion of the Lacanian 'look' which I intentionally avoided in this paper.

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